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ABSTRACT

Presented at the 1979 National Art Education Association Convention on the arts in special education, the paper focuses on studies of the aesthetic and therapeutic use of special art procedures with handicapped students. The art education needs of handicapped students are briefly discussed, along with the impact and implications of new legislation. Studies reviewed include those in which drawings and paintings served as tools for identifying and teaching concepts and cognitive skills traditionally associated with language, those in which special art procedures substituted for language in developing concepts such as space and order, those in which art procedures served aesthetic and therapeutic goals concurrently, and those justifying the high teacher expectations of the art abilities of deaf students. (DLS)

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WORKING WITH HANDICAPPED ART STUDENTS

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paper in a panel presentation: The Arts in Special Education

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We have been asked to define the art education needs of handicapped children, to comment on the impact and implications of new legislation, and to make suggestions for more effective art programs.

I am tempted to preface my comments with a remark by MacDonald Critchley when he was asked to define learning disabilities. He said it was like trying to define the undefinable and unscrew the inscrutible.

The art education needs of handicapped children are not so different from the needs of normal children that special definitions are called for, in my judgment. I have worked with deaf and hard of hearing children, with learning disabled and with emotionally disturbed children, and found the similarities so much greater than the differences that the same approach can be used with all children, shifting emphasis, however, to meet individual needs.

For example in teaching children who have difficulty understanding what is said, we can emphsize demonstration rather than talk. Art techniques lend themselves to demonstration. In teaching any student, it is often easier to demonstrate a technique than talk about it.

We can also emphasize communication. For all of us, handicapped or socalled normal, the visual arts are one of the channels for conveying thoughts and feelings. For those with communication disorders, the viual arts can become a major channel for expressing and receiving ideas. In teaching

these children we can emphasize representational drawings, paintings, and sculptures and minimize the nonfigurative or abstract. We can encourage them to project thoughts and feelings about recognizable people, objects or events rather than present tasks of construction or design. (sign lang)

On the other hand, if our students have learning disabilities rather than communication disorders, and especially if their disabilities include visuo-motor weaknesses, we can reverse the emphasis, stressing form rather than content, construction and design rather than subject matter. With any student, exploratory learning is important in art education. With children who confuse d and b or p and q, we can stress drawing tasks that sharpen awareness of the way things work or appear from different points of view. With children who have severe motor problems we can offer modeling clay rather than drawing instruments and monoprinting with objects such as corks rather than tasks that call for fine motor skills.

With emotionally disturbed children, we can place emphasis on building self-confidence. With any student, art experience provides special opportunities for reinforcing emotional balance, but by the same token, instead of building confidence, it provides special opportunities for tearing it down. The subjectivity of a painting makes the painter particularly sensitive to criticism of his work. ~~His~~ skill, or his teacher's knowledge can both be irrelevant to his sense of failure or success. Like enjoyment, self-confidence in art is easily destroyed. Unlike a daydream, a fantasy on paper is vulnerable to anyone who sees it and feels qualified to judge.

With disturbed children, we can avoid experiences that might cause anxiety and emphasize projective drawing techniques such as asking a child to make a scribble, look for an image in the scribble, then develop the image into a drawing.

IN other words, we can use the same objectives and methods with all our students if we remain flexible and emphasize appropriate methods to meet individual needs.

The second area of concern, this afternoon, is the impact of new legislation on art education and implications for the future. It has been widely observed that teachers in general have been unprepared and reluctant to work with handicapped children. Gazing into my crystal ball, however, I think I see art educators becoming qualified as art therapists as well, working closely with psychologists, counselors, and classroom teachers. With art expressions so much a part of right hemisphere functioning, art teachers have unique opportunities to observe a child's ability to perceive and integrate information and to form concepts. We also have unique opportunities to evaluate emotional and cognitive growth because we have access to a child's nonverbal expression of conflicts and concerns, clues to his perception of himself and others through his drawings and paintings. We also have unique opportunities to help a child fulfill wishes vicariously and express unacceptable feelings in an acceptable way by drawing, painting, or modeling them.

As for the third area of concern - how can we provide more effective art education, I would like to offer three suggestions. First, to expand graduate art education programs to include courses in art therapy. This is not to suggest that teachers should try their hands at psychiatric intervention. There is real danger in trying to explain the unconscious meanings in a drawing. For one thing, the same symbol may have different meanings for different individuals. For another, interpretations can be distorted by the therapist's own unconscious needs. And even if interpretations are accurate, great harm can be done in breaking down a child's defenses.

On the other hand, a little knowledge can be very useful if an art teacher can spot clues to emotional problems, and alert the specialists trained to deal with them (Brian)

My second suggestion is to expand graduate and undergraduate programs to include courses in cognitive development. Drawings and paintings can serve as tools for identifying and teaching concepts and cognitive skills traditionally associated with language. My own work for many years has been concerned with assessing and developing three such concepts said to be fundamental in reading and math: concepts of space, concepts of sequential order, and concepts of class or group of objects.

Special art procedures have been developed to substitute for language in developing these concepts. The procedures were initiated in a State Urban Education Project in which

one teacher worked with children who had auditory and language impairments. The thirty-four children in the experimental groups showed significant improvement in ability to express the three concepts while the thirty-four control children did not improve (Silver, 1973, 1973).

The procedures were again found effective in a subsequent study involving children who had learning disabilities. In this study, eleven graduate students who had enrolled in a course in therapeutic techniques in art education worked individually with eleven children, under faculty supervision. These children also showed significant improvement in the three areas related to cognition that were the focus of the study (Silver and Lavin 1977).

In our third study, another group of graduate students worked individually with children identified in their school as having special educational needs rather than more severe diagnosis of "handicaps". Again, the experimental children showed statistically significant gains.

As measures for evaluating cognitive skills, the drawing tests were found to have significant correlation with the Standard Reading Achievement Test in a study involving 75 first, second, and third grade normal children.(Hayes, 1978).

Some art educators feel that using art for diagnostic or therapeutic purposes is bound to interfere with learning about art. The question whether art teachers can pursue other goals without neglectong their own was also of much concern to me in the 1972 study. To obtain quantitative information, two judges were asked to evaluate the artwork produced in the first semester. The judges, a university professor of art and an art therapist,

evaluated three drawings or paintings produced by each of the eighteen children -the child's first work, his last work, and a work produced at mid-term. The 54 drawings and paintings were identified only by number and age of the child, and shown in random order to conceal the sequence in which they had been produced. The judges, working independently, rated each work on a scale of 1 to 5 points for various categories of art skills and sensitivity. Of the 18 children, the first drawings of 9 children received the lowest score, 1 point, while their last drawings received the highest score, 5 points for being highly imaginative and inventive or highly skillful. In skill and expressiveness combined, the judges found improvements that were significant at the .01 level (Silver, 1978, p. 225). These findings seem to indicate that the same kind of art experience can serve aesthetic and therapeutic goals concurrently,

My third and last suggestion, is: raise expectations. We tend to have low expectations of ability in handicapped children. We tend to equate language with intelligence and expect an inarticulate child to lack intelligence, let alone talent or giftedness. Unfortunately, expectations can be self-fulfilling (study by Rosenthal and Jacobson).

Now that art teachers are being asked to work with handicapped children as never before, they may find it useful to know that they can expect to find some who are gifted and many who have more interest in art than their normal peers whose experiences and interests are not restricted by physical handicaps. Support for this claim can be found in a study reported elsewhere. To summarize briefly, it was a project in art

education for deaf and hard of hearing children and adults, supported by a grant from the US Office of Education. Art classes were provided for 54 such students who were not selected, but were enrolled as applications were received following newspaper and other announcements. Panels of judges evaluated the work produced. The judges did not know they were evaluating the work of handicapped students. It was felt that if they had this knowledge, they might be influenced either favorably out of sympathy or unfavorably because of low expectations. To compare these students with unimpaired students, four assessments of aptitude were made: three evaluations by panels of judges and the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking. In addition, a painting produced in one of the art classes was submitted to an open juried art exhibition. (Silver, 1967, 1978).

In the first evaluation, thirteen art teachers were asked to compare the artwork with the work of their own students for originality, expressiveness, and sensitivity. Result: the combined average scores for deaf students (N=16) were slightly above average when compared with hearing students in elementary schools through colleges and beyond, despite a decided disadvantage - six deaf teenagers were compared with hearing art students in colleges and art schools at the graduate level.

In the second evaluation, three university professors of art were asked to evaluate paintings by 22 deaf and 22 hearing

art students. Result: the average scores of deaf children and adults were slightly higher than the scores of their hearing counterparts.

The third evaluation was a comparison of deaf and hearing art students by eleven teacher-observers, Results: nine of the eleven teachers found the deaf equal or superior to the hearing in each category - independence, interest in art, sensitivity, originality, and expressiveness. The nine were all art teachers, three of whom had taught only hearing students while the remaining six had taught both deaf and hearing students.

The Torrance Test of Creative Thinking was administered to the eight children in the second-term children's class and to three teenagers and one adult in the adult class. Result: the composite average score of the twelve students were in the 96th percentile. Eight students were in the 99th percentile.

Finally, a painting produced in the adult class was submitted to an open juried competition of a professional artists group. It was one of sixty paintings and twenty-five sculptures accepted from over 200 entries, and one of twelve works receiving an award.

These findings, as well as the findings of other studies (Silver, 1966, 1973) suggest that children and adults who are deaf or deficient in language can be expected to have as much aptitude, interest, and creative ability in the visual arts as their normal peers.

To summarize, we can use the same approach in teaching handicapped and normal children providing we shift emphasis to meet individual needs. For more effective art programs, we can expand undergraduate and graduate programs in art education to include courses in cognitive development and art therapy. We can also raise our expectations of ability in handicapped students as the findings of several studies show we can do without losing touch with reality. And with opportunities to offer more effective art programs, art teachers can expand their role in the education of all children, handicapped or otherwise.

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